

BOBBY BLAND

In a time when many popular rock 'n' roll groups are looking into the rear view mirror to pay homage to their influences, it is most fitting that one of the primary benefactors of this trend is Bobby Bland. With the blues it's always nice to get down to the Real Thing and, speaking from experience, Bobby says it best: "In order to be a real blues singer, you have to go through some of the things that you sing about." Bobby feels that "it's not what you say, but how you say it." And he has said it as well as anybody in the business with such hits as "Blind Man," "Two Steps from the Blues," "You've Got Bad Intensions," "Poverty," and "I Pity the Fool."

Bobby was born Robert Clavin Bland in Rosemark, Tennessee, about thirty miles from the Memphis city limits. His musical career started while he was singing in the local church choir and his early love for Gospel music still influences his style today. In the Rosemark days Bobby had yet to be introduced to the blues — most of his time was spent playing, strangely enough, country and western songs for any and all captive audiences in front of the local grocery store.

When his family moved to Memphis, Bobby discovered the magic of Gospel artists like the Pilgrim Travelers, the Soul Stirrers, and the Dixie Hummingbirds. His love for singing led him to a group of Memphis musicians who went by the name of "The Beale Streeters," dubbed after the funky avenue where W. C. Handy and his blues contemporaries had played years before. The Beale Streeters were composed of such heavyweights as B. B. King, Johnny Ace, Roscoe Gordon, Little Junior Parker, as well as Bobby Bland — certainly one of the blues' first supergroups, then in its embrionic form.

Bobby recorded his first solo effort in 1950, a tune called "Loving Blues." He went on to record "Cried All Night" on the Modern label before receiving his "greetings" from Uncle Sam. The draft staunted the growth of Bobby's recording career but, while in the Army, the singer spent sometime with the Special Services Branch in the same group as Eddie Fisher, who was also an undiscovered talent in the music world at the time.

After his three and half years in the Armed Services, Bobby settled in Houston where he appeared at the Club Matinee every Wednesday night in the amateur talent show. His professional status was soon confirmed when, after winning the show everytime he performed, the other musicians had him banned from the show. A short time later Bobby signed a recording contract with Duke Records and when he recorded his first single it was titled, logically, "Army Blues."

In April, 1955, Bobby recorded "It's My Life" which was backed with "Time Out." This record, along with hits like "Farther Up the Road," helped establish Bobby Bland as a blues artist to be reckoned with. Since then, Bobby has proved himself to be a singer *non pareil* in his field.



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Bobby has worked the country from coast to coast, playing all types of clubs from the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, to the Regal Theatre in Chicago, to the Whisky A-Go-Go in Hollywood. Part of his success with such a wide audience, Bobby feels, is the unique styling of his singing. "I try to do songs in a ballad-type way, where it won't be strictly blues. Now what I basically have to rely on is the blues but I educate myself through a spectrum of records and people that I think have something to offer me. For instance, I've always admired Tony Bennett, Perry Como, and Andy Williams. This is the thing that I based my blues on and I have quite a few of their records that I listen to and learn from."

Bobby Bland is beginning to achieve the popularity held by B. B. King as well as the white audience appeal of artists like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. And time is on Bobby's side — his style of music, a rich amalgam of Gospel, blues, and ballads, has made him one of the most important names of the last decade in popular contemporary music.